

Charles Coughlin

Charles Edward Coughlin (25 October 1891 – 27 October 1979) was a Canadian-American Roman Catholic priest at Royal Oak, Michigan's National Shrine of the Little Flower Church. He was one of the first to use radio to reach a mass audience, as more than tens of millions tuned to his weekly broadcasts during the 1930s. Early on, his programs were typically religious then eventually began to discuss economic and political issues with attacks upon bankers and communists. He founded the National Union for Social Justice in November, 1934 with the aim of betterment of all people regardless of race or religious background.^[1]

His publication *Social Justice* was barred from the mails by US postmaster in 1942. During this period Father Coughlin was threatened by the Attorney General to cease his political activities or face the charge of sedition.^[2] Coughlin was not a defendant in the Great Sedition Trial of 1944.



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Early broadcasts and political activism

Charles E. Coughlin was born in Hamilton, Ontario on October 25, 1891 to Thomas J. Coughlin, a Great Lakes stoker from Indiana, and to Amelia Mahoney Coughlin, a Canadian seamstress. He was ordained to the priesthood in Toronto on 29 June 1916 during WWI. He taught at Assumption College in Windsor, Ontario, before moving to Detroit in 1923.

He began his first Radio broadcast on October 3, 1926 on station WJR, giving a weekly sermon on a regular program. The radio program was named after his church, "The Golden Hour of the Little Flower."^[3]

In 1931 the CBS radio network dropped free sponsorship, so he raised money to create his own national network, which soon reached millions of listeners. He strongly endorsed Franklin D. Roosevelt during the 1932 Presidential election. He was an early supporter of Roosevelt's New Deal reforms and coined the phrase "Roosevelt or ruin", which became famous during the early days of the first FDR administration. Another phrase he became known for was "The

New Deal is Christ's Deal."^[4] In January 1934, Coughlin testified before Congress in support of FDR's policies, saying, "If Congress fails to back up the President in his monetary program, I predict a revolution in this country which will make the French Revolution look silly!" He further stated to the Congressional hearing, "God is directing President Roosevelt."^[5]

Coughlin's support for Roosevelt and his New Deal faded later in 1934, when he founded the National Union for Social Justice (NUSJ), a nationalist worker's rights organization which grew impatient with what it viewed as the President's unconstitutional and pseudo-capitalistic monetary policies. His radio programs preached more and more about the negative influence of "money changers" and "permitting a group of private citizens to create money" on the general welfare of the public.^[6] He also spoke about the need for monetary reform. Coughlin claimed that the Depression was a "cash famine". Some modern economic historians, in part, agree with this assessment.^[7] Coughlin proposed monetary reforms, including the elimination of the Federal Reserve System, as the solution.

Among the articles of the NUSJ, were work and income guarantees, nationalizing "necessary" industry, wealth redistribution through taxation of the wealthy, federal protection of worker's unions, and decreasing property rights in favor of the government controlling the country's assets for "public good."^[8] Illustrative of his disdain for capitalism is his statement that, "We maintain the principle that there can be no lasting prosperity if free competition exists in industry. Therefore, it is the business of government not only to legislate for a minimum annual wage and maximum working schedule to be observed by industry, but also to curtail individualism that, if necessary, factories shall be licensed and their output shall be limited."^[9]

Coughlin was the most prominent Roman Catholic speaker on political and financial issues, with a radio audience that reached 30 million people every week on 60 stations.^[10] When he began criticizing the New Deal, Roosevelt sent Joseph P. Kennedy and Frank Murphy, prominent Irish Catholics, to try to tone him down. Ignoring them, Coughlin began denouncing Roosevelt as a tool of Wall Street. Coughlin supported Huey Long until Long was assassinated in 1935, and then supported William Lemke's third party in 1936. As Coughlin turned into a bitter opponent of the New Deal, his radio talks escalated in vehemence against Roosevelt, capitalists and "Jewish conspirators". He was initially supported, and later – after turning on Roosevelt - opposed in his efforts by another nationally known priest, Monsignor John A. Ryan.^[11] Kennedy, who strongly supported the New Deal, warned as early as 1933 that Coughlin was "becoming a very dangerous proposition" as an opponent of Roosevelt and "an out and out demagogue." Kennedy worked with Roosevelt, Bishop Francis Spellman and Eugenio Cardinal Pacelli (the future Pope Pius XII) in a successful effort to get the Vatican to silence Coughlin in 1936.^[12] In 1940-41, reversing his own views, Kennedy attacked the isolationism of Coughlin.^[13]



In 1935, Coughlin proclaimed, "I have dedicated my life to fight against the heinous rottenness of modern capitalism because it robs the laborer of this world's goods. But blow for blow I shall strike against Communism, because it robs us of the next world's happiness."^[14] He accused Roosevelt of "leaning toward international socialism on the Spanish question." As Michael Kazin notes, Coughlinites saw Wall Street and Communism as twin faces of a secular Satan. Coughlinites believed that they were defending those people who cohered more through piety, economic frustration, and a common dread of powerful, modernizing enemies than through any class identity.^[15]



Opposition to Jewish supremacism

After the 1936 election, Coughlin increasingly expressed sympathy for the governments of Hitler and Mussolini as an antidote to Bolshevism.^[16] His CBS radio broadcasts advocated gentile self-defense in the face of Jewish supremacy. He blamed the Depression on an "international conspiracy of Jewish bankers", and also said that Jewish bankers were behind the Russian Revolution. On November 27, 1938, he said "There can be no doubt that the Russian Revolution ... was launched and fomented by distinctively Jewish influence."

He began publication of a newspaper, *Social Justice*, during this period, in which he printed *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. Coughlin claimed that Marxism in Europe was a Jewish plot. At a rally in the Bronx in 1938, he gave a Roman salute and said, "When we get through with the Jews in America, they'll think the treatment they received in Germany was nothing."^[17]

On November 20, 1938, two weeks after Kristallnacht, when Jewish businesses were attacked, Coughlin said "Jewish persecution only followed after Christians first were persecuted."^[18] After this speech some radio stations, including those in New York and Chicago, began refusing to air his speeches without pre-approved scripts; in New York, his programs were cancelled by WINS and WMCA, leaving Coughlin to broadcasting on the Newark part-time station WHBI. This made news in Germany, where papers ran headlines claiming "America Is Not Allowed to Hear the Truth". On December 18, 1938 two thousand of Coughlin's followers marched in New York protesting potential asylum law changes that would allow more Jews into the US. The protests continued for several months.

After the NUSJ ended in 1937 Coughlin began to support a christian organization called the Christian Front. In January 1940, the Christian Front was shut down for allegedly plotting to overthrow the government of the United States. Coughlin publicly stated, after the plot was discovered, that he still did not "disassociate himself from the movement", and though he was never linked directly to the plot, his reputation suffered a fatal decline.^[19]

Cancellation of radio show

At its peak in the early 1930s, Coughlin's radio show was phenomenally popular. His office received up to 80,000 letters per week from listeners, and his listening audience was estimated to rise at times to as much as a third of the nation.

Earl Boyea shows that the Roman Catholic Church did not approve of Coughlin. The Vatican, the Apostolic Delegation in Washington, D.C., and the archbishop of Cincinnati all wanted him silenced. They recognized that only Coughlin's superior, Detroit Bishop Michael Gallagher, had the canonical authority to curb him, but Gallagher supported the "Radio Priest". Due to Gallagher's autonomy and the prospect of Coughlin leading a schism, the Roman Catholic leadership did nothing.

A radio battle was fought in the late 1930s between The Reverend Walton E. Cole, a Unitarian minister in Toledo, Ohio, and Coughlin. Cole tried to prevail upon the Roman Catholic hierarchy to have Coughlin's inflammatory broadcasts stopped. Walton Cole's widow, Lorena M. Cole, donated his papers to the Claremont School of Theology with personal notes and reminiscences about this tense episode.

In spite of his early support for Roosevelt, Coughlin's populist message contained bitter attacks on the Roosevelt administration. The administration decided that although the First Amendment protected free speech, it did not necessarily apply to broadcasting, because the radio spectrum was a "limited national resource" and regulated as a publicly-owned commons. New regulations and restrictions were created to force Coughlin off the air. For the first time, operating permits were required of those who were regular radio broadcasters. When Coughlin's permit was denied, he was temporarily silenced.

Coughlin worked around the restriction by purchasing air time and having his speeches played via recordings. However, having to buy the time on individual stations seriously reduced his reach and strained his resources.

According to Marcus' book, Coughlin's opposition to the repeal of a neutrality-oriented arms-embargo law triggered more successful efforts to force him off the air. In October 1939, one month after the German Campaign in Poland, the Code Committee of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) adopted new rules which placed "rigid limitations on the sale of radio time to spokesman of controversial public issues". Manuscripts were required to be submitted in advance. Radio stations were threatened with the loss of their licenses if they failed to comply. This ruling was clearly aimed at Coughlin due to his opposition to prospective American involvement in World War II. As a result, the September 23, 1939 issue of *Social Justice* stated that he had been forced from the air "...by those who control circumstances beyond my reach" (pp 173-177).

Coughlin reasoned that although the government had assumed the right to regulate any on-air broadcasts, the First Amendment still guaranteed and protected freedom of the written press. He could still print his editorials without censorship in his own newspaper, *Social Justice*. However, the Roosevelt administration stepped in again, this time revoking his mailing privileges and making it impossible for Coughlin to deliver the papers to his readers. He had the right to publish whatever he wanted, but not the right to use the United States Post Office Department to deliver it. The lack of a conduit to his followers seriously reduced his influence, and after the attack on Pearl Harbor and the declaration of war in December 1941, the anti-interventionist movement (such as the America First Committee) began to sputter out, and isolationists like Coughlin were seen as being sympathetic to the enemy. In 1942, the new bishop of Detroit ordered Coughlin to stop his controversial political activities and confine himself to his duties as a parish priest. Coughlin complied and remained the pastor of the Shrine of the Little Flower until retiring in 1966. He refused numerous interview opportunities, and continued to write pamphlets denouncing Communism until his death in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan in 1979, at the age of 88.

Coughlin was reported by an occasional parish visitor to have kept his rectory in Hazel Park, Michigan.

Quotes

- *America has been led to a crossroads. One leads to Communism, the other to Fascism. I take the road to Fascism.*
- *"The theory that gold is sacred, gold is wealth, gold is more precious than men and the homes in which they live, is the theory of the European Jew.*
- *Democracy! A mockery that mouths the word and obstructs every effort on the part of an honest people to establish a government for the welfare of the people. Democracy! A cloak under which to hide the culprits who have built up an inorganic tumor of government that is sapping away the wealth of its citizens through confiscatory taxation.*

- *The Rome-Berlin Axis is a great political rampart against the spread of Communism. As such the Rome-Berlin Axis is serving Christendom in a peculiarly important manner.*^[20]

Works (selection)

- *Christ or the Red Serpent*
- *A Series of Lectures on Social Justice* (1935)
- *MONEY! Questions and Answers* (<http://www.balderexlibris.com/index.php?post/Coughlin-Charles-Edward-Money-Questions-and-answers>) (ca. 1936)
- *Not Anti-semitism but Anti-communism* (1938)
- *"Am I an Anti-Semite?"* (<https://archive.org/details/AmlAnAnti-semite/page/n1/mode/2up>) (1939)
- *Father Coughlin answers his critics* (<http://www.balderexlibris.com/index.php?post/Coughlin-Charles-Edward-Father-Coughlin-answers-his-critics>)
- *I take My Stand* (<http://www.balderexlibris.com/index.php?post/Coughlin-Charles-Edward-I-take-My-Stand>)

Organizations started by Father Coughlin

- National Union for Social Justice
- National League of Mothers

See also

- Huey Long
- Gerald L.K. Smith
- Christian Front
- Arthur Terminiello
- Denis Fahey
- Martin Luther Thomas
- Gerald Winrod
- Adolf Stoecker
- Lineage of American Nationalist organizations and individuals

External links

- Texts from three Father Coughlin broadcasts (<http://www.ssa.gov/history/fcspeech.html>)
- *An Answer to Father Coughlin Critics* (https://archive.org/details/An_Answer_To_Father_Coughlins_Critics_/mode/)
- *A SERIES OF LECTURES ON SOCIAL JUSTICE* By Rev. Charles E. Coughlin (<http://faculty.webster.edu/corbet/e/personal/reading/coughlin-lectures-35.html>)

References

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2. *Buncombe Bob*, by Julian M. Pleasants, p. 177.
3. *Encyclopedia of Right-Wing Extremism In Modern American History*, By Stephen E. Atkins, page 73
4. Peter C. Rollins and John E. O'Connor. *Hollywood's White House: The American Presidency in Film and History* (2005), University Press of Kentucky, page 160
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7. Milton Friedman and Anna J. Schwartz. *A Monetary History of the United States, 1867-1960* (<http://eh.net/bookreviews/library/rockoff>) (1963), Princeton University Press (for the National Bureau of Economic Research)
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9. Charles A. Beard and George H.E. Smith, eds., "Current Problems of Public Policy: A Collection of Materials" (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1936), p. 54

10. *Lessons from the Great Depression for Dummies*, By Steve Wiegand, page 147
 11. Turrini, Joseph M.. Catholic Social Reform and the New Deal (<http://www.archives.gov/nhprc/annotation/march-2002/catholic-social-reform.html>). Retrieved on 2008-08-02.
 12. Thomas Maier, *The Kennedys: America's Emerald Kings* (2003) pp 103-107
 13. Amanda Smith, *Hostage to Fortune*.(2002) pp 122, 171, 379, 502; Alan Brinkley, *Voices of Protest* (1984) p 127; Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion* (1995) pp 109, 123.
 14. Kazin p 109
 15. Kazin p 112
 16. <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USAcoughlinE.htm>
 17. William Manchester *The Glory And The Dream*, 1974, Bantam Books, p. 176.
 18. Marc Dollinger (2000): *Quest for Inclusion*. Princeton University Press. p.66
 19. *New York Times*, January 22, 1940
 20. *The Nazis Go Underground*, by Curt Riess page 116
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